

Discretion and Dictatorship

by Maik Schlüter

In 1958, Joan Colom began taking photographs in Barcelona's El Raval neighbourhood. At this time, he was 38 years old, worked as a bookkeeper, and his photography was purely a leisure pursuit. Initially, Colom did not call himself a professional photographer, although he brought a great passion and considerable knowledge to his art. In 1957, he purchased a Rollei and joined *Agrupació Fotogràfica de Catalunya*, an important and innovative institution in the Catalan photography scene at the time. In spite of his professional equipment and a professional context where intense discussions about photographic themes and possibilities were conducted, Colom did not intend to exhibit his pictures or otherwise make them public. "I didn't want to show my photographs. I just wanted to take them, develop them, print them, and keep them in a box at home."¹ In 1961, however, he did agree to show his Raval photographs from the period 1958-1961 at the Sala Aixelà in Barcelona. The show then toured through Spain and in 1964 the book *Izas, rabizas y colipoterras* by writer and later Nobel Prize winner Camilo José Cela appeared with a selection of Colom's pictures as illustrations. In spite of this success, the book caused a scandal: the choice of pictures – made by Cela and the publisher – focused above all on one aspect of the Raval: prostitution. Joan Colom was far from happy with this narrow view, as he was more interested in Raval's social diversity. The focus on images of the red-light milieu sparked debate. The straight-laced, conservative premises of censorship under the Franco dictatorship, which at best allowed certain frivolities, defined prostitution, adultery and wild sensuality as subversive processes necessarily leading to the dissolution of traditional family structures and gender roles. As a result of the negative reactions and his reserved nature, Colom, who was no friend of controversy, withdrew and gave up photography for many years. His Raval photographs were not made accessible to a wider public again until a solo show almost four decades later. In 2002, Joan Colom was awarded the "Premio Nacional de Fotografía".

Joan Colom's biography recalls the life of Franz Kafka or Fernando Pessoa. Colom spent almost all his working years as a bookkeeper in the same company and led a quiet life. In the shadow of this unspectacular existence, he created a unique artistic oeuvre. With his Raval photographs,

Colom accomplished a complex and pioneering photographic oeuvre. In contrast to the overwrought and mannered “salon photography” that was prevalent in late-1950s Spain, Colom favoured directness and immediacy. Not, however, in the sense of the precise recording of a specific moment, its effect and its authenticity condensed into a single image thanks to the photographer’s quick reactions. Colom’s approach stands more in the conceptual tradition than in the context of reportage or the inspired individual picture. This is all the more astonishing since he found his subjects on the street and one could easily take him for a classical flaneur or street photographer. Using a hidden camera, Colom obtained candid portraits of prostitutes and their clients, of street children and traders in the Raval neighbourhood.

Colom’s work recalls the approach of American photographer Walker Evans, who made his legendary subway passenger series with a hidden camera as early as the 1930s. Colom did not know about this technique. He chose it intuitively because taking photographs without being noticed allowed him to get closest to his subjects, and because it meant they were not turned into obvious objects of his photographic desire. Only afterwards, in the darkroom, did the process of appropriation and reshaping begin. The contact sheets bear witness to the determination and radicality with which Colom enlarged his pictures, how confidently and wilfully he created the compositions. For him, the negative and the print were not photochemical fetishes, but material to be worked with. His technique and results were so modern and so fresh that today the pictures have lost nothing of their impact and significance.

There are links in Colom’s work to the visual idiom and motifs of photographers as diverse as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Ruth Orkin, Brassai and Robert Doisneau. But individual pictures and sequences could also have been taken in the 1980s or ‘90s. Comparison with positions such as those of Cindy Sherman, Sophie Calle, Merry Alpern or Roger Ballen only seems erroneous at first glance: many of the pictures look like film stills or staged settings, condensing exemplary situations of social life into single pictures, series or sequences. Other pictures have an observational character and come across as the fruits of a semi-documentary concept. In this way, Joan Colom anticipates narrative modes and techniques that were only to find full expression in the context of staged and conceptual photography and that only began to establish themselves as an art form much later.

The sometimes blurred and grainy pictures illustrate the precarious situation of making pictures: a convincing ratio between distance and proximity, conception and liveliness must be established. These pictures are taken by someone who has mastered the trick of being in the thick of the action while preserving an eye for what is important. His visual world brings together poetry and hardship, analysis and empathy.

One should not forget that when Joan Colom took these pictures, he was living under the military dictatorship which General Francisco Franco set up at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 and upheld until his death in 1975. Like all dictatorships, it was characterised by repression, denial of liberties, and persecution. In the early years, the power of the putschists was founded on internment, torture and murder. Only slowly did liberal and pluralist approaches come into play. At the end of the 1950s, the country was poor, the economy unstable. It was only in the course of the following decade that Spain slowly developed from an agricultural to an industrial economy, the cities grew and the urban population began to represent the country's social and cultural self-image. In spite of this, the 1960s were marked by unrest and political struggles. In economic and cultural terms, there was an opening towards Europe: more and more tourists discovered Spain as a holiday destination and the country made efforts to present its cultural products abroad. Where censorship was concerned, these developments led to abstruse contradictions that were in effect when Colom was taking his pictures: things banned from domestic consumption were permitted for the export market. The guidelines of the censors were broadly defined. Among other things, the ban covered the portrayal and justification of suicide, euthanasia, revenge, divorce, adultery, illicit sexual relations, prostitution, attacks on the institutions of marriage and the family, abortion and contraception, alcoholism, drug abuse, slang, statements against the church and other institutions, tendentious historical accounts that did not match the regime's official version of the truth, criticism of the state apparatus and its leader.²

It is not hard to discover numerous violations of the censors' absurd rules in Joan Colom's photographs. Although the photographer focused his interest on the restricted field of El Raval, he gives an exemplary account of life under the Franco dictatorship. Colom shows the contradictions and the double standards of both macho culture and Catholicism: the man as

patriarch deceives the bastion of the family and uses the services of prostitutes. Such freedoms were not accorded to women in the society of the time. The woman's role was clearly defined: either she lived as a chaste and faithful spouse at the centre of society, or she leads a marginal existence as an object of taboo male desires in the repressed milieu of El Ravel. The prevailing Catholicism under Franco was also full of contradictions. Repressive sexual ethics and a strict moral code did nothing to alter the fact that poverty and destitution, pleasure and sensuality shaped the neighbourhood in social and economic terms.

Joan Colom is an important chronicler of an aspect of life which under the Franco dictatorship was officially not allowed to exist. His photographs show how fine the line is between seduction and prohibition, social disadvantage and bourgeois milieu, truth and falsehood. Not least the courage and humanity of Joan Colom make his Raval pictures an outstanding work of twentieth century photography.

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1 Joan Colom interviewed by Marta Gili, Barcelona, 8 December 2005, quoted from: Marta Gili, "Besiegter Kiez, gewonnener Kiez. Joan Coloms Raval", in: *Joan Colom. Raval*, Göttingen 2006, p. 12.

2 cf. Dorothee Seitz, *Der Film im Franquismus*, Alfeld/Leine 1997, p. 23.